New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1954

The next scheduled theatre opening in New York is in September; issue containing complete reviews will be mailed as usual the following week.

Volume XV, Number 7 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 17, 1954

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Theatre Openings

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Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 17, 1954

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Pajama Game"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 14, 1954

THEATER

'The Pajama Game'

By WALTER F. KERR

Spring Picnic

BROADWAY looks well in pajamas. The bright, brassy, and jubilantly sassy show that opened at the St. James Thursday is not just the best new musical of the season. That would be fairly easy. It's a show that takes a whole barrelful of gleaming new talents, and a handful of stimulating ideas as well, and sends them tumbling in happy profusion over the footlights.

* * *

"The Pajama Game" has a fresh and winning grin on its face from the outset. Adapted from a satirical novel by Richard Bissell—Mr. Bissell has also had a hand in the shaping of the libretto—it opens up some startling terrain for the song-and-dance field. Eddie Foy jr. strolls in front of the curtain and suggests, with a slight leer, that we are about to be embroiled in the meatier symbols of the problem play. And the rousing first chorus ("Racing With the Clock") does actually take place against an assembly line in the Sleep-Tite pajama factory.

Thereafter the rolling soft-shoe improvisations, the sentimental ballads, and the zanier comic explosions hurry us along under timeclocks, blinking railroad towers and beer-joint trellises. The boy (John Raitt) is a tough-minded company man. The girl (Janis Paige) is a tougher-minded union girl. The show becomes a kind of light-hearted adventure in industrial folklore—and it is gay, contemporary, wonderfully innocent and wonderfully sly all at once.

* * *

The score is from newcomers, too. Richard Adler and Jerry Ross have hitherto been represented by a couple of tuneful, but not astonishingly original, numbers in "John Murray Anderson's Almanac." In their first crack at a full score they are not, perhaps, any more original; they seem to me mildly in debt to Frank Loesser's stylistic inventiveness. But this is a thoroughly professional parade of tunes — varied, melodic, and cheerfully urgent. "A New Town Is a Blue Town" strikes just the right balance for a show that is going to be both realistic and romantic about its unusual background. "Hey There" and "Small Talk" are exceptionally robust love songs, brilliantly suited to John Raitt's wide-open baritone. "Steam Heat" is a second-act sizzler and "7½ Cents" roars its way effectively over the evening's one slightly ticklish spot: the settlement of a union strike.

Introductions are still in order. The dances by Bob Fosse (new to Broadway, but courtesy of M-G-M) are fast, funny when they ought to be, and neatly dovetailed into a hard-driving book. Mr. Fosse has, furthermore, worked out some amiable comic fantasies for an animated cartoon named Carol Haney. Miss Haney looks like a bow-legged gosling. Her mouth and nose seem to have been designed as partial illustrations for "Huckleberry Finn." And she makes "Steam Heat" hotter than even its doting composers could have hoped.

* * *

Not that the more familiar members of the company are ever caught napping. Eddie Foy jr. is an old hand at gliding through a roomful of girls and gargling a passing tune. His limp and lazy methods works perfectly on a second-string jape called "Think of the Time I Save"; and he stops the show easily with "I'll Never Be Jealous Again."

John Raitt is in excellent form as a superintendent in love with the redheaded spokeswoman for a grievance committee, and Janis Paige is pretty and spirited as the hard-to-get girl. Ralph Dunn, Reta Shaw, and Stanley Prager add to the exuberant fun.

Of course, behind all the brand-new names and the brightly creative stage business stands a gentleman named George Abbott. Mr. Abbott has co-authored the book and, together with Jerome Robbins, supervised the staging. As wizard of the enterprise, he has wrought a humdinger.

"THE PAJAMA GAME"

Musical comedy with book by George Abbott and Richard Bissell; based on Mr. Bissell's novel "7½ Cents"; music and lyrics by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross; staged by Mr. Abbott and Jerome Robbins; settings and costumes by Lemuel Ayers; choreography by Bob Fosse; musical director Hal Hastings; orchestrations by Don Walker; dance music arranged by Roger Adams; presented by Frederick Brisson, Robert E. Griffith and Harold S. Prince at the St. James Theatre, May 13, 1954. The cast:

Hines	**Eddie Foy Jr.**
Prez	**Stanley Prager**
Joe	**Ralph Farnworth**
Hasler	**Ralph Dunn**
Gladys	**Carol Haney**
Sid Sorokin	**John Raitt**
Mabel	**Reta Shaw**
1st Helper	**Jack Drummond**
2nd Helper	**Buzz Miller**
Charlie	**Ralph Chambers**
Babe Williams	**Janis Paige**
Mae	**Thelma Pelish**
Brenda	**Marion Colby**
Poopsie	**Rae Allen**
Salesman	**Jack Waldron**
Eddie	**Jim Hutchinson**
Pop	**William David**
Worker	**Peter Gennaro**

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 14, 1954

'Pajama Game' Hits Fast Pace

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Pajama Game," in at the St. James last night, is about the best natured musical you may ever see. It is young and funny and earthy and fast.

Most of the show has the fine snapping air of a beautifully staged class rally. Nobody but George Abbott can ever quite direct it into a show.

If a hassle between garment workers and a pajama factory president sounds unlikely as material for a musical comedy, guess again. Union Negotiations, as rival for a hero, is a new one. But you have to remember that the leading lady here is officially known as Grievance Committee.

The hero is Superintendent. Instead of the traditional slick dastard to bring a rift to romance, this time it is a 7½-cent raise.

Threat to Dreams.

You follow the kids in the factory through their troubles and their fun, out on a picnic and down in a Latin beer hall.

Musically this is pretty much John Raitt's show. He seems warmer and easier here than he has ever been, even in "Carousel." He is at his impressive best in a number called "Hey There."

It is tricky to guess the popular fate of the songs Richard Adler and Jerry Ross have done. The tunes rely constantly on counter melody and round singing. They are so dazzlingly arranged by Don Walker that they keep the show effusive every moment.

This is Janis Paige's first Broadway musical. It is an auspicious debut in more ways than one.

Hillbilly Number.

With hardly anything in the show all her own, Miss Paige makes a big, warm, strong impression. Her high spot is a jazzed up hillbilly number with Raitt. There seems no kind of song she cannot handle with ease.

Eddie Foy Jr. can surprise nobody, but he can satisfy everyone. This is such a pro, dancing and singing and larking with such ease that you even roar when they dress him up like Gorgeous George.

Find of the night is a lanky miss called Carol Haney. She is an expert dancer and a nutty comedienne with original style. She has a lot to do in the show.

Reta Shaw, who generally does character bits in musicals, must surprise even herself by stopping the show. It is a ditty and a soft shoe in the arms of Foy that does it. The hefty comedienne does a sharp job throughout, as does Stanley Prager as Union Prexy.

Last night's audience must have been full of backers, for the applause was stubborn and crazy. But any audience will stop "Pajama Game," over and over, just for the fun of it.

The New York Times
May 14, 1954

Theatre in Review: 'Pajama Game'

Musical Comedy Has Debut at St. James

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THE last new musical of the season is the best. It is "The Pajama Game," which opened at the St. James last evening with all the uproar of a George Abbott show. He and Richard Bissell put the book together out of Mr. Bissell's recent novel, "7½ Cents." Applying the good old football spirit to a strike in a pajama factory, the book is as good as most though no better.

For, like the customers who are now going to pour into the St. James, Mr. Abbott is really interested in the color, humor and revelry of a first-rate musical rumpus. "The Pajama Game" fits those specifications exactly.

Richard Adler and Jerry Ross have written an exuberant score in any number of good American idioms without self-consciousness. Beginning with an amusing satire of the work tempo in a factory, they produce love songs with more fever than is usual this year; and they manage to get through a long evening enthusiastically in other respects also. "Once a Year Day" is a jubilee number with a very rousing finish; "There Was Once a Man" takes the goo out of love expertly. Mr. Adler and Mr. Ross write like musicians with a sense of humor; and Don Walker, who has provided imaginative orchestrations, shares their high spirits.

•

Fortunately, the people who manufacture pajamas are wonderful company in the theatre. The head-man is John Raitt, with the deep voice and the romantic manner; and the head-woman is Janis Paige, whose voice is almost as exhilarating as her shape. Entangled in some love-and-union hokum, they make mating seem attractively normal, and they sing as though they meant it.

Eddie Foy Jr., a true clown who can strut standing still, is immensely funny as a factory time-keeper and a mighty friendly man in a dance. Reta Shaw and he contribute one amiable soft-shoe dance that made the audience explode last evening.

"The Pajama Game" has been staged by Mr. Abbott and Jerome Robbins, both of whom like motion on the stage. That may account for the lightness and friskiness of the performance. And that may also help to explain why Bob Fosse's ballets and improvised dance turns seem to come so spontaneously out of the story. This is the place to express considerable gratitude to Carol Haney. In the cast she is the secretary to the boss of the plant.

But in fact she is a comic dancer of extraordinary versatility. Shaggy-haired and gamin-like, she suits the mode of the season except that she substitutes caricature for glamour. Her burlesque strip-tease for a funny number called "Her Is" is effortless and convulsing. With Buzz Miller and Peter Gennaro, she introduces the second act with a swift, high-pressure vaudeville that is terrific. Both as dancer and actress Miss Haney is superb.

•

"The Pajama Game" includes all the usual properties of a loud and ample musical carnival. The costumes and scenery are by Lemuel Ayers, who can make even a factory workroom look theatrical. There is a union picnic for purposes of festive spectacle in the first act, and a restaurant called "Hernando's Hideaway" where the second act goes pleasantly insane.

Mr. Bissell, former tow-boat skipper, and currently boss of a shirt and pajama factory, is a more original writer than you would suspect in the book of this show. Beaten into shape for Broadway, his tale of factory labor problems looks a good deal like dear old Siwash. But say this for the book: it provides an original setting. And, as usual, Mr. Abbott has provided the noise, speed, guffaws and excitement of an energetic, amusing show.

Journal-American
May 14, 1954

It's a Whale of a Show!

Musical Is Raucous, Rollicking and Fast

By JOHN McCLAIN

WELL here it is, folks, at long last—a superb new musical. "The Pajama Game," which opened at the St. James Theatre last night, is fast, raucous and rollicking; it is the best book show that's hit the town since "Guys and Dolls," and it should remain with us seasons to come. This is a whale of an evening in anybody's auditorium.

Here is, first of all, a quite acceptable plot; there is also a brilliant and ingratiating score, a brigade of highly skilled performers, a series of charming sets, but the king-size kudos must go to Mr. George Abbott who, as co-author and director, has put the whole thing together with such pace and imagination that almost no moment remains unfulfilled. If they had gratified last night's hysterical demands for encores the performance would still be in progress.

Incredible Delight

Mr. Abbott has taken a novel called "7½ Cents" and, working with its author, Richard Bissell, has evolved a sturdy structure concerning love in a pajama factory.

There are demands for a raise of 7½ cents an hour which are complicated by the fact that the head of the grievance committee (Janis Paige) has fallen in love with the new superintendent (John Raitt). You hardly need to be told that it all comes out wonderfully well in the end.

You can be advised, however, that the story is told with incredible delight and ingenuity. When the music might offer merely the opportunity for a pedestrian girl-boy number, the authors and choreographers have combined to endow it with particular styling and speed.

The hit number, "Hey There," which must be introduced by John Raitt, in solo, is lifted out of the commonplace by having him sing it into a tape recorder, playing back the second chorus as a duet with himself.

Eddie Foy Jr. and Reta Shaw, an engaging doll who is built like a blimp, take an innocuous number called "I'll Never Be Jealous Again" and stop the proceedings dead with a soft shoe routine.

Stanley Prager and Carol Haney make similar history with another bit which could have been lost with less inspired business.

"There Once Was A Man," delivered by Raitt and Janis Paige is not only a striking example of Richard Adler-Jerry Ross music, but a great tribute to the inventiveness of the directors and the skill of the principals.

Equal citations should be given Bob Fosse who is, I assume, responsible for such highlights as the "Once A Year Day" ballet, "Hernando's Hideaway" and the "Jealousy Ballet." They are all extremely simple and mad and marvelous.

Sly Humor

In the department of personalities this show should be remembered for exploiting Mr. Raitt's fine vocal talents without benefit of the usual

period costumes with which he has been identified.

He emerges as a normal young man, unhampered by those theatrical gestures required of singers who wear tights and chaps.

It is also a wonderful medium in which to present Janis Paige as a factory girl, tough and realistic, with an unexpectedly ample voice. And it gives Eddie Foy Jr.—too long absent from our boards—a resounding opportunity to come back in a role tailored to his sly, relaxed humor.

But most of all, perhaps, it give us a new young lady named Carol Haney, an infectious comedienne and a great dancer. She will be long remembered for her efforts in "Steam Heat" in particular, and for the other delightful moments in which she cavorts with or without music.

In conclusion, a sweeping bow to the producers, to Lemuel Ayers for his exciting sets and costumes, to Jerome Robbins for his big assist in all departments, and to the many unmentioned members of an immaculate company. Not forgetting for a moment the old master—George Abbott.

New York Post

May 14, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Factory Life in Musical Comedy

Vigor, vitality and a sense of excitement are important ingredients in the theater, and, because it possesses an abundant share of them, "The Pajama Game," the new musical comedy which officially closed the season at the St. James last night, gives every evidence of being a box-office success. It deserves to be, too. I have certain reservations about it, which will be suggested later, but it moves along at a stimulating clip, its dances are dynamic and its music lively, and its principals and chorus have just the necessary spirit and heartiness.

"The Pajama Game," which is adapted from a recent novel called "7½ Cents," seems in outline what used to be known in the pre-war decade as a proletarian play. That is to say it deals with affairs in a small-town factory, goes into the matter of a sit-down strike for higher wages, and has as its hero a foreman and as its heroine the fighting leader of the union grievance committee. But please don't let this give you the wrong impression. It isn't serious about economic affairs, and they are merely the springboard for the songs and dances.

The Words

This, it seems to me, is just as well, because the book, for all its hint of practical business background, isn't very interesting as either realism or satire. But it does give a mood to the lyrics. They are studiously down-to-earth and guiltless of poetic imagination, and they are perhaps characterized by a song that ends with "In one ear and out the other." This, by the way, is a love song. Nevertheless, if the words are neither beautiful nor witty, they have the aforesaid virtues of vigor and vitality, and the players project them excellently.

On first hearing, which doesn't always provide a verdict for the ages, the words and music by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross suggest something of the manner of good road-company Rodgers and Hammerstein, which isn't to be sneered at by anybody. I remember most pleasantly two numbers called "Hernando's Hideaway" and "7½ Cents," but all of the songs, if they are not altogether masterpieces, have the commendable quality of gay liveliness, and they are offered with a gusto and relish that bring out the best that is in them.

The Dancers

It is in its dancing that "The Pajama Game" is at its most enlivening. There is no pretentiousness in the choreography of Bob Fosse and Jerome Robbins, and they maintain the pseudo-realistic mood of the story with brightness and imagination. Here matters are excitingly aided by the delightful work of a brilliant young dancer named Carol Haney, who, even if she insists on being a little more Leslie Caron-ish in her gaming appearance than is necessary, is a distinctive and engaging performer and a valuable addition to local musical comedy.

The three stars are likewise of help to the evening. As the girl labor leader, Janis Paige repeats the fine impression she made in "Remains to Be Seen," playing and singing with charm, humor and generally winning attractiveness. In the chief humorous role, Eddie Foy Jr. proves that he is an immensely likeable comedian, and he can be equally funny whether he is going into a simple little dance or into some odd business of removing his pants. John Raitt's fine voice and determined masculinity are admirably suited to the role of the foreman. I'll be astonished if "The Pajama Game" isn't the latest hit.

DAILY NEWS

May 14, 1954

'Pajama Game' A Funny & Frisky Musical Romp at the St. James

By JOHN CHAPMAN

With George Abbott in charge of the general situation and with Jerome Robbins supervising the dancers, "The Pajama Game" is a funny and frisky musical comedy which, during many ensuing months, will be harder to get into than out of.

I mention Abbott and Robbins first because they are the directors of this show, which opened last evening at the St. James Theatre, and without their knowhow and their senses of humor "The Pajama Game" might not have come off as well as it did. It is very difficult to take bunches of actors, songs, scenery and dancers, throw in a spot of plot and come out with a Broadway show of the first class. This is no task for amateurs, and thank goodness Robbins and Abbott are professionals.

Triumph for Foy.

They also are lucky, for they have fine material with which to work. They have Eddie Foy Jr., in the role of a time-study man in a pajama factory (he would have been called an efficiency man 25 years ago), who also is an expert knife-thrower. It seems to me that Mr. Foy has really come into his own in this show as a comedian and a personality. He never exerts himself—beyond getting a shirt-cuff stuck in a trousers zipper in the funniest moment of pantomime I have seen since I don't know when—but he makes every minute he is on the stage thoroughly enjoyable.

The directors also have this year's overnight star, Carol Haney. Miss Haney looks like a tall but awkward Audrey Hepburn. She has a froggy voice, slanty eyes and an impish grin—and I haven't made up my mind yet whether she is funnier acting or dancing. But I will say that a song-and-dance number titled "Steam Heat," in which Miss Haney is teamed with Buzz Miller and Peter Gennaro, is one of the funniest and most artful turns I ever saw on a stage.

There are plenty of other good people working in "The Pajama Game." John Raitt, as a supervisor on a PJs factory, and Janis Paige, as the head of the employes' grievance committee, carry the love story, and they have a fascinating song called "There Once Was a Man" which is a combination of Caribbean calypso and Billy Hill Western ballad. Miss Paige and Mr. Raitt are supported by a number of friendly comedians and comediennes.

Good Fast Fun.

The plot is about labor trouble in a pajama factory, adapted by Abbott and Richard Bissell from a novel by Bissell called "7½ Cents." (The workers want a raise of 7½ cents an hour.) Eddie Foy explains it in the beginning by saying the plot is symbolical of the war between capital and labor. Pretty soon a factory official comes in to complain about the workers, saying "The tops are 15 minutes behind the bottoms." Capital and labor get together in the end, of course, and Raitt gets Miss Paige, and everybody has a big pajama dance.

All of this is good fast fun. Abbott whisks a number of clever and inventive scenes on and off the stage. Several of the songs, by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, are clever and inventive, too—for instance, "I'm Not At All in Love," "I'll Never Be Jealous Again," "There Once Was a Man" and "Steam Heat." Lemuel Ayers' settings are a great help, too, and Bob Fosse rates a bow for some of the choreography including the remarkable "Steam Heat" number.

"The Pajama Game" provides a happy finish for this theatrical season.

Daily Mirror
May 14, 1954

'Pajama Game' Clicks As Sure-Fire Winner

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Pajama Game" came to the St. James Theatre Thursday evening, and hit like a big league rookie does when the manager starts cutting the team down to size. Such veterans as Eddie Foy, Jr., John Raitt and Janis Paige were in there slugging like Babe Ruth, while newcomer Carol Haney also walloped a couple of rousing home runs.

The wonderful thing about "The Pajama Game" is its get-up-and-go. From principals to chorus, every member of the cast is on his toes. From the overture to the finale, it is a riot of fun. We suspect the first-nighters are going to be applying unguents to their blistered palms this morning.

"THE PAJAMA GAME" is a musical about the romance between the determined superintendent of an undergarment factory and the head of the union's grievance committee. If you want to know how they arrive at a happy ending, you'll have to visit the St. James. If you expect to do that soon, buy your tickets immediately. For there will be a long line at the box-office by the time you get there.

George Abbott and Richard Bissell based the song-and-dancer on the latter's best seller, "7½ Cents." Young Bissell, in real life, is superintendent of his dad's pajama plant in Dubuque, Iowa, but during rehearsals he's developed a yen for New York. He has announced that, if the show clicks, he plans to settle here.

Abbott and Jerome Robbins have staged the production at jetplane speed. Richard Adler and Jerry Ross have contributed a lively score that includes such candidates for the hit parade as "There Once Was a Man," "Hey There," "Small Talk," "A New Town Is a Blue Town," "Hernando's Hideaway," "Steam Heat," "Her Is" and "I'm Not At All In Love."

THE INVENTIVE Don Walker has fashioned clever orchestrations that use unusual combinations in the pit. He is most effective with sax, clarinet, electric guitar and bull fiddle. He really goes to town with "There Once Was a Man." Hal Hastings merits a nod for his dynamic batoneering.

Bob Fosse, heretofore a dancing actor, makes an auspicious bow as choreographer, while Lemuel Ayers has designed appropriate settings and costumes.

John Raitt and Janis Paige stopped the show on several occasions with their romantic pretending and sure-fire warbling. Eddie Foy, Jr., as a jealous efficiency man, tied up the proceedings more than once with his eccentric dancing and hilarious comedy.

CAROL HANEY brought the house down with her effervescent stepping and clowning. This young graduate of films and niteries reminds us more than a little of the great Kay Thompson.

Salutes are also due Stanley Prager, Ralph Dunn, Reta Shaw, Buzz Miller, Ralph Chambers, Marion Colby, Rae Allen, Jack Waldron, William David, Peter Gennaro, Thelma Pelish and all the other kids.

In "The Pajama Game," Frederick Brisson, Robert E. Griffith and Harold S. Prince have a sure-fire winner. A deliriously daffy delight! A royal flush and a grand slam rolled into one!

"The Seagull"

New York Post
May 12, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Problem of Reviving a Great Play

Chekhov's "The Sea Gull" is one of the great and beautiful plays of the modern theater, and its revival gives stature to any dramatic season. It was a pleasure to see it again last night at the Phoenix Theater, even though I thought the production left much to be desired. Despite a cast of prominent and talented actors, it seemed to me that the performance as a whole was disappointingly colorless and unexciting. It lacked, if I may use a possibly pretentious word, orchestration, and it suggests only partially the quality of an authentic masterpiece.

It is, of course, by no means an easy play to do. Not that it is in any way an obscure or esoteric work to understand or appreciate. It is merely that its cascade of sheer bitterness and its veritable anthology of melancholia is mixed with great vitality and an ironic sense of deep humor, which magnificently permits its author and his characters to stand off and laugh unashamedly at its own brooding sense of pity and futility, and such a curiously mingled mood of sadness and gaiety presents vast difficulties for adequate stage presentation.

Its Timeliness

Although its scene is the Russian countryside toward the end of the last century, "The Sea Gull" does not provide for inspection a single complex, neurosis or questioning doubt that seems alien in the world of today, and, for all its Czarist Muscovite background, it is as timely now as it was in the year it was written. And, although it virtually revels in self-pity, it does so with a gusto and incisiveness that keeps it from being shallowly defeatist and gives it, in some strange manner, almost a heroic quality. It is as vital as it is moving.

All of its people come to vivid and sympathetic life, even when they are being in their most outrageous outbursts of selfishness or self-pity. Chekhov didn't lavish any sentimentality on them, but he regards them with that compassionate combination of understanding and humor that gives even the weakest of them a kind of inner-dignity. Even the unscrupulous and second-rate novelist, Trigorin, has his moments of honest self-revelation, and his long consideration of the trials of his craft remains one of the finest things ever set down about the writer's job.

The Style

Some of this moving and fascinating quality does emerge in the Phoenix production. At least, there is enough of it to enable one to realize that he is in the presence of one of the major works of the world theater. What I chiefly found discomforting in the current revival, despite some good individual performances, was the lack of a single unifying style. For instance, while Mira Rostova was giving what seemed to me excessive mannerism to the title role, Montgomery Clift and Kevin McCarthy were throwing away the parts of the two authors by their extreme understatement.

The most satisfying portrayal of the evening, I thought, was given by George Voskovec, who brought just the proper note of half-humorous brooding to the small role of the family physician. Maureen Stapleton and John Fiedler caught much of the required manner, too. So, to a considerable extent, did Judith Evelyn, June Walker, Sam Jaffe and Will Geer, who are certainly among the more helpful members of the well-known company. On the whole, though, I fear the presentation lacks distinction. But what a play "The Sea Gull" is!

"THE SEA GULL"

Play by Anton Chekhov, adapted by Mira Rostova, Kevin McCarthy and Montgomery Clift; staged by Norris Houghton; settings by Duane McKinney; costumes by Alvin Colt; lighting by Klaus Holm; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Mr. Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, May 11, 1954. The cast:

Mme. Irina Arkadina.....Judith Evelyn
Constantin Treplev.....Montgomery Clift
Peter Sorin.....Sam Jaffe
Nina Zarechnaya...Mira Rostova
Shamrayev.....Will Geer
Pauline.....June Walker
Masha.....Maureen Stapleton
Boris Trigorin..Kevin McCarthy
Dr. Dorn.....George Voskovec
Medvedenko.....John Fiedler
Yakov.....Lou Polan
Housemaid.....Sarah Marshall

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 12, 1954

'Seagull' Opens Door To Lengthy Debate

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Since the plays of Anton Chekhov are notoriously open to many interpretations, there is probably no such thing as a perfectly satisfactory production of any of them.

The new offering, at the Phoenix Theater, of "The Seagull" has the makings of innumerable lengthy arguments about its meanings and the way it should be done. This is the best thing such a production can possibly do.

Sometimes Chekhov is considered a gloomy Russian playwright. This is odd, because he bills his plays as comedies.

They are bitter, all right, but they are comedies because of the huge dark jokes life plays on his characters.

Certainly "The Seagull" has a melodramatic enough story. Its central figure is an untalented young writer who has been brought up in the shadow of his mother's penury and popularity.

Battle of Boredom.

Her lover seduces and deserts the young girl he adores. Even the beginning of success as a writer cannot make up for his loneliness, and he ends a suicide.

As is so often true of Chekhov, his story is one of energetic people pressing against idleness and boredom.

This company falls into a common fault of often playing people who are enervated and idle, rather than people who hate their frustration.

There is too a tendency to be terribly secretive about many of the lines.

The present version of the play has been done by Mira Rostova, Kevin McCarthy and Montgomery Clift, who play three of the most interesting roles.

Clift is perhaps the most successful person in the company at getting the deeply bitter humor out of the author's lines. He enhances the comedy of many defensive lines by saying them with complete seriousness.

Local Debut.

Miss Rostova makes her local debut as the unhappy ingenue, and is most articulate at describing her gauche charm in the early scenes. In her final long passage when she pronounces her ambition and faith, she seemed to me a trifle deliberate. This scene is an inevitable temptation for the actor to emphasize what the play is doing for him rather than what it is doing for the audience.

McCarthy plays the author with an air of handsome satiation. His speech about the driving pressure of his talent seemed to me too calm to fulfill its purpose.

Judith Evelyn plays the actress, mother of the young writer. She portrays the coquettish selfishness of the woman without adding the spice of being sinister.

Successful Roles.

Two of the more successful characterizations are those of Maureen Stapleton, as a philosophical girl trying to escape love, and of June Walker as the estate manager's depressed wife.

John Fiedler is the weakling school teacher, George Voskovec the aging Don Juan, Will Geer the noisy overseer, and Sam Jaffe a self-assertive ancient of the family.

There is a particularly striking set by Duane McKinney for the interior of the house.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 12, 1954

THEATER

'The Sea Gull'

By WALTER F. KERR

YOUNG and well-meaning actors are always playing Chekhov to improve themselves. It seems to me that they should first improve themselves, and then play Chekhov.

The plays of the nineteenth century Russian dramatist are much less a training ground than a test of what all the training has accomplished. Tenuous, muted, in every way fragile, they capture the heat-lightning atmosphere of a desultory and dying world. In "The Sea Gull," revived at the Phoenix Tuesday a canvas of characters sits idly around an elm tree: one fanning herself listlessly, one lolling in a chaise-lounge, one curled up in a wheelchair. There is a long, sighing, only faintly fidgety silence. Someone suggests that "the angel of silence has flown over us."

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And a Chekhov play can only come to life if that silence is felt as a presence—only if there is a distant rustle of interior life behind the languour and indifference and despair. The new company at the Phoenix does not capture that silence, or that barely discernible rustle. It works very earnestly. From time to time it rouses itself to a sudden, illuminating pitch, though usually only where there is something melodramatic at hand. For the most part it retires into a kind of jumpy privacy, leaving the rest of us detached and not a little jumpy on our own.

There are, however, at least three intermittently arresting performances. Montgomery Clift is the young poet of the piece, the restless and naive innovator who can touch neither his mother's nor his beloved's heart.

Mr. Clift does not really work any more openly, any more showily, than the others. But there is a secret, and very clear, line of emotion behind the terse facade. The actor's edgy anxiety before the performance of his adventurous play; the elusive contempt with which he tells a novelist his works are charming; the management of a difficult soliloquy in which he edits his own work—all are casual bits of playing and completely telling ones. And Mr. Clift's groundwork is firm; when the play rises to its few passages of explosive emotions—the boy's rage with his mother, his abandoned gratitude for a compliment—the performance enlarges without effort, expands into furious fire.

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Judith Evelyn is very nearly as effective as the actress-mother. Her Madame Arkadina is bored, haughty, irritable—and shrewdly understood. She picks steadily away at a meal while she broods over her son's attempted suicide, and tells us in the automatic rhythm and in the monotonous tone of her complaint everything we need to know about a woman who is both selfish and genuinely bewildered.

A third personal success is registered by Maureen Stapleton, the bitter but infinitely realistic daughter of an estate-keeper. Though this girl is "in mourning for her life" and given to lightly tragic posturing, she is earthy, pungent, and sharply aware. Miss Stapleton outlines these contrasts very graphically, then ties them together into a believable whole.

"The Sea Gull" also has its competent performances: Sam Jaffe's not very resigned invalid; Will Geer's bustling and booming overseer; June Walker's embarrassed wife; George Voskovec's philosophic physician.

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But the key role of the discarded Nina—the forlorn "sea gull" of the title—is a curiously remote fragment in the hands of Mira Rostova. The visual image is always attractive: Miss Rostova is waif-like and appealing; her hands and her body are enormously expressive. But she is, for one thing, handicapped by an accent; and she is additionally difficult to hear. Her final scene becomes almost pure choreography. There are impulsive thrusts, brilliantly suggestive gestures; but it is a dance from which really meaningful verbal content has finally vanished. And Kevin McCarthy, as an unusually youthful Trigorin, speaks the lines clearly and tastefully—but with very little definition. He makes clear to us what Chekhov has to say about the character; but he does not seem personally involved.

There are suitably misty green-and-grey garden backings, and sun-filled shutters for a golden living-room, designed by Duane McKinney. But neither garden nor living-room seems permanently inhabited. Actors pass through. But somehow or other they do not meet, they evoke no mood, they leave nothing lingering behind them.

The New York Times
May 12, 1954

Theatre: 'Sea Gull' at the Phoenix

Off-Broadway Group Stages Chekhov Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

CHEKHOV'S "The Sea Gull," an incomparably beautiful play, has fallen heir to an interesting performance, which opened at the Phoenix last evening. Obviously, the group performance ought to be more integrated and luminous, and only a permanent company could achieve that perfection.

But this review is being written by one theatregoer who is gratified by any intelligently staged performance of a Chekhov play. Did anyone ever write the truth with so much ease, accuracy and limpidity? "The Sea Gull" is a masterpiece. Everything about it rings true. The dialogue, here put into a new adaptation, has the grace of casual conversation. The few events that occur on a Russian country estate of the nineteenth century are spontaneous and enlightening.

Beyond and behind the surface of the play Chekhov has caught the great truths of life in general—the carelessness, selfishness, aimlessness and weariness of civilized existence. There is a lot of discussion nowadays about the tone of "The Sea Gull." Is it comedy or tragedy? In his direction of the current performance, Norris Houghton has not plumped for either side.

For he knows that, comedy, or tragedy, "The Sea Gull" is the candid truth of human society—comic in its inadequate grasp on the fundamentals of social living, tragic in the consequences. The mood and pitch of the performance are perfectly resolved in the languid flow of life on a country estate, interrupted by temperament and concluded with horror. Mr. Houghton understands and reveres the script.

Some day we may have a finely attuned company that can act plays like "The Sea Gull" perfectly. In the meantime, we shall have to be satisfied with the mixed styles inherent in the work of good actors who are not accustomed to play together. The result is not fine, but most of it is alive and interesting and some of it is emotionally stirring.

Judith Evelyn's Madame Irina Arkadina is superb—vain, nervous, full of guile. The scene in which she binds Trigorin to her permanently is brilliantly performed. Montgomery Clift's lonely, brooding Constantin, her unhappy son, is beautifully expressed without any foolish pathology. It is more American than Russian, but so is Mr. Clift, for that matter. As Masha, the lovesick daughter of the estate manager, Maureen Stapleton is admirable also. She catches both the humor and the despair without making a big point of either.

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There are some amusing performances by Sam Jaffe as the aging, garrulous brother, Will Geer as the estate manager who is both testy and hearty, June Walker as his distraught though affectionate wife, George Voskovec as the philosophical physician and John Fiedler as the boring schoolteacher. Let's not say that all the styles harmonize. But the characters are defined with relaxed insight into the parts.

Without a good Nina and a good Trigorin, a performance of "The Sea Gull" is imperfect. That is the situation here. Mira Rostova as Nina is handicapped by a heavy accent. She is further handicapped by a florid style alien to the whole spirit of Chekhov. And Kevin McCarthy's amiable, weak Trigorin has none of the worldliness or lazy corruption of the part; and Mr. McCarthy does not suggest any of the qualities of a writer. These important parts are inadequately played, which is a pity.

For in many respects the performance as a whole catches a good deal of the detached understanding that Chekhov had about life in general. Duane McKinney's settings of a garden and a family dining room are intelligently designed. As usual, the Phoenix standards are professional. And, also as usual, the Phoenix is offering the subscribers and customers a play of quality. Of first quality, in fact. For "The Sea Gull" is a masterpiece. Chekhov had a genius for telling the truth without having to raise his voice.

Journal-American
May 12, 1954

Impressive Production

Colloquial Adaptation Of Chekhov Pleasant

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE Phoenix Theatre, 2nd ave. at 12th st., has done itself proud once again with a brilliant big-name production of Chekhov's "The Sea Gull," the final presentation in its series for the season.

Everything is there—enough stars for three Broadway shows, moving graciously through the Russian countryside, delivering a new and pleasantly colloquial adaptation of the classic. Trouble is, I just don't happen to like it much as a play.

It seems to me the first act is cluttered and interminable; so much that is said is neither particularly provocative nor amusing, and endless effort is expended in delineating characters and maneuvering them into their appointed paths.

Settles Down

Once this is achieved, the second and final act settles down to straight exposition, but just as the action seems to be moving toward a rewarding climax it is again interrupted frequently by static and discursive interludes.

Most of this probably makes excellent reading, but it doesn't play. In words of practically one syllable, I would say there are too many people and I don't care enough about any of them.

Forgetting a lot of subordinate persons and problems, Mr. Chekhov has concerned himself mainly with a mixed-up young man (Montgomery Clift) and his unrequited love for an equally confused young woman (Mira Rostova).

Clift is doing all right with his romance until his mother (Judith Evelyn) arrives on the premises with her lover (Kevin McCarthy), a personable and successful author. Miss Rostova's fresh charms appeal to McCarthy and she follows him to the big city, becomes his mistress and bears him a child. He then tires of her and returns to Miss Evelyn.

In the wind-up they all return to the country estate where we first met them and Clift, now a successful author himself, bares his heart to Miss Rostova. She replies at great length that she is still more than ever in love with McCarthy. And with this Clift steps into the next room and kills himself.

Light Movements

Along the way there are some amusing moments with Sam Jaffe, who plays Clift's ailing uncle; and with Maureen Stapleton and John Fiedler, daughter and son-in-law of Jaffe's estate manager. There are equally brilliant performances by George Voskovec, as the family doctor, and June Walker and Will Geer, as the superintendent and wife.

Montgomery Clift is a sure and effortless actor, and one feels that he contributed largely in bringing the adaptation within the scope of his talents. Mr. McCarthy, also one of the adapters, is suave and beguiling in the role of the novelist, and Judith Evelyn plays Clift's mother with humor and distinction.

I am sure Miss Rostova, who made the present translation from the original Russian, performed a capable task, but I was not entirely captivated by her portrayal of The Girl. This may or may not have been due to the direction of Norris Houghton, who turned in a creditable job overall.

This is a most impressive production of "The Sea Gull"—no doubt about it. But I still think it's a dreary drama.